Ivan Karp


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In an interview he gave towards the end of his life, Jomo Kenyatta was asked why he wrote so much about his “people,” the Kikuyu of Kenya:

One of my deliberate interests . . . was to produce a book on some aspects of African tradition and culture which would make a real impact on those who had no real knowledge of how Africans lived and thought and organized their own societies. It has often seemed frustrating to represent or negotiate on behalf of people only barely visualized under headings of character or personality. (Daily Nation, 24 August 1974)

This remark seems to me to produce the predicament of development written, as it were, from the standpoint of the subjects of development policy and practice. These subjects are called to account in a discourse that defines them as failing to exhibit in their cultures or persons the qualities of developed persons. I argue that this is a discourse with strong continuities derived from the colonial period, but with roots that are far deeper and earlier than colonialism itself. Imperial expansion and colonial rule were the historical mechanisms through which development discourse was transmitted and interpellated; it provided the word system through which imperialism and colonialism were embedded. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I am not going to engage in systematic historical research. Rather, I will present an analysis derived from the materials of my experience in Kenya by considering how Kenyans were presented in administrative discourse during the colonial period in development documents, in media representations of Africa and Africans, and in contemporary Kenyan discourse about personhood and Nation—as in Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi’s assertion a few years ago that Kenya was two hundred years behind the West.

Both modernity and development were present in President Moi’s declaration. Development was surely seen as what Kenya presently lacks, but the time frame suggests a specific time lag that placed Kenya in a premodern temporal relationship to the contemporary West. President Moi’s public assertions illustrate the connection between development as an ideology and concepts of modernity, as does much of development discourse.

“Development” and “modernity” are key words that are intimately related to one another. They often share a relationship of foreground and background to one another. The invocation of one side of the term customarily depends on implicit understandings of the other. In post-colonial societies, development can be the more pressing and visible term, and the extensive literature on development discourse indicates this. Yet modernity is not something that is left undiscussed; the connection between the two is frequently drawn, even if neither is capable of precise definition. We can note here that precise definition is not a feature of key words. As Williams (1976) shows us, key words are sites of contest and change, where shifts over time express and reflect changing social circumstances while also formulating responses to them. Development and modernity act this way: they take on different meanings depending on the register in which they are used and the circumstances in which they are invoked.

This relationship is manifested both conceptually and in practice. In theories of development, such as modernization theory, modernity is seen as the motor of development. Modern forms of organization related to bureaucracy and industrialization become the cause of development, while development becomes the measurable index of modernity. This is still the case for much of the macro-scholarship and policy work on development, where large-scale surveys, such as the World Bank Development Report, are used to measure and rate the state of development—typically in terms of indexes derived from “modern” economies and societies.

Development discourse at the local level in so-called underdeveloped societies may use terms that are translated as “development” but which easily invert the relationship between development and modernity. In East Africa, for example, “development” is the translation term for maendeleo. Maendeleo translates literally from the Swahili as “going forward”; it connotes rapid movement toward the some future goal (com-
Surely this is not completely different from the sense in which “progress” is used in English. It may be noted that progress, including rapid change, can be a defining feature of modernity (e.g., Bernard 1982). In Melanesian Tok Pisin, similar connotations are found in the word *kam-ap*, literally “take off” or “come up” (Dahl and Rabo 1992). Yet as Angelique Haugerud (1995) has shown in her excellent study of development discourse in Kenya, while *maenalo* can be defined as progress, it is measured primarily in terms of goods derived from the outside, such as roads, schools, clinics, and consumer goods. The Kenyan government is judged, in fact, by how successful it has been in providing those goods, even when the government, through its representatives, seeks to allocate responsibility for lack of development to the local people themselves. Thus the local-level discourse and formal government meetings that Haugerud examines display a contest between competing definitions of development that are marked by a shared formal meaning attributed to the term.

This combination of apparent agreement and actual contest is a fundamental aspect of how key words operate in discourse. This operation is given a further twist by the association of some key words with others. In the case of *maenalo*, aspects of both development and modernity are inextricably mixed; the choice to translate the term as one or the other can seem arbitrary from a lexical point of view. Thus, Don Kulick (1992) argues that in the New Guinean society where he did research, Gopun, *kam-ap*, which has real formal similarities to *maenalo* as a concept, is translated as “development” but associated with numerous locally defined attributes of modernity, such as Christianity and command of nonlocal language. Depending on who uses concepts such as *kam-ap* or *maenalo*, and for what purposes, one aspect of these concepts may be foregrounded or backgrounded. Readily available in debate and other forms of discourse is the potential to shift perspective—to engage in what Rodney Needham (1983) refers to as a “change of aspect.” The meaning of a concept can shift the terms of discourse itself and create a very different picture of person and society than that implied in an earlier usage. This is certainly true of the concept we easily gloss as “development.”

Hence it is not easy or even profitable to define either development or modernity as mutually exclusive concepts that can be contained in any of the many aspects that are used to define them. Modernity is a notoriously slippery concept, the meaning of which ranges from rapid change to abstraction, depending on context. As a concept, “development” may not be as elusive in use, but it is not easy to pin down despite strenuous efforts on the part of development agencies themselves. In practice, development can be measured and defined in both material and nonmaterial terms. But in use, it is highly heteroglossic and contestable, as I have shown above.

Clearly what we have here is a complex of ideas and images that is used in manifold ways. But these ways are not unpatterned or lacking in history. This relates to the fact that the association of development and modernity has its origins in the emergence of industrial capitalism and with its accompanying forms of metropolitan life. In the many examples of development discourse and their association with ideas about modernity, substantial contrasts are often drawn between the qualities of urban life and those of rural life and culture. In Kenya, colonial discourse, for example, the Country and the City—to use Raymond Williams’ (1973) phrase—defined a contrast between space that was static (lacking in capacity and will to change), as opposed to being dynamic and progressive. As Williams (1973) shows, this association was historically pronounced in England. In further parallel with Williams’s analysis, the Kenyan countryside was seen as a space of stability and morality where “natives” were attached to tribal authorities. By contrast, the city was seen as a space of disorganization and anomic, at least for Africans—more Hobbesian than anything else.

Two government policy papers, published five years apart, show these contrasting images in stark form. In 1947, Norman Humphrey, the senior agricultural officer of the Kenya Colony, argued in an excellent study, *The Ligur and the Land*, that farming practices could be reformed and the countryside made productive if the colonial administration used “traditional land authorities” for whom natives felt a natural attachment. By 1952, the newly installed governor of Kenya Colony, Sir Phillip Mitchell, one of the key figures in the development of indirect rule, argued that these same African communities had to be introduced to more rational means of understanding and managing their land if they were to deal with problems of population growth and underdevelopment of productive resources. Mitchell draws a stark contrast between the cultural achievements of Europeans and the absence of technological advancement found among rural Africans. For Mitchell, the problem had nothing to do with “traditional authorities” (notwithstanding his advocacy of indirect rule) but with agricultural education. Yet within a decade, after the Mau Mau rebellion, the cultural discourse in Kenya official and settler society was concerned with turning the Kikuyu people (and other Africans) from detribalized urban dwellers into an organized tribe once again.
These striking and rapid shifts in discourse about development and other matters seem to me to draw on the imagery of early industrial capitalism described by both Williams and E. P. Thompson. Both argue that these discursive formations are carried forward in association with capitalist and imperial expansion. Their suggestions are, in my judgment, more than borne out by the Kenyan experience. More than agricultural policy in a settler colony is at stake in the post-World War II Kenyan official documents cited above. A key problem that officials have grappled with in their official discourse is how to transform one kind of society—primarily rural and focused on reproduction of personnel—to one designed to provide rural resources to the industrial or (in the case of Kenya) export sector of society. This problem—the production of a labor force that could also feed itself—was a key economic concern of colonial Kenya, focused as it was on a plantation-based settler economy and agricultural export.

The transformation of labor is just what Thompson points to in his many studies of early industrialization in England. From a cultural point of view, Thompson shows what is at stake is the nature of the laborer and the means required to turn a rural subject into an urban, industrial worker. This has obvious parallels in the colonial experience, even when the transformation is supposed to happen primarily in the countryside. This was not lost on E. P. Thompson (1991:356), who observes, “For what was said by the mercantilist moralists as to the failures of the eighteenth century English poor to respond to incentives and disciplines if often repeated by observers and by theorists of economic growth, of the people of developing countries today.” Those failures, as Thompson shows, were attributed to Human Nature itself. “The transition to industrial society entailed a severe restructuring of working habits—new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature on which these incentives could bite effectively” (1991:354). For Thompson, the inevitably and always unfinished transition opened up a debate and contest over economic growth that was also a debate about human nature itself. And it is precisely in the intersection between assertions about the conditions under which growth will happen and the nature of the subjects that should be the motor of growth that ideas about modernity (as a phenomenon that is opposed to what comes before) and development once again intersect. How they intersect will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter, where I seek to examine the nature of human nature, as exhibited in ideas about the person, and the concept of development as ambivalently elaborated in different contexts and debated in practice.

Development Discourse

Development discourse predicates two kinds of human nature in conflict and describes the result in terms of agency—the raw material on which development is worked, and the agents of development. This discourse, derived from the aftermath of Western imperial and colonial expansion, reproduces startlingly similar ideas about the person in a wide range of settings. These include popular presentations that seek to interpret and explain difference of all sorts, academic contexts that make development the object of inquiry, professional events held within the development community and for its clients, and official and political discourses ranging from policy documents and reports to political speeches and parliamentary debates. Not all of these forums reproduce these ideas in the same fashion. The majority of technical reports tend to assert ideas about human agents more by side than through explicit texts. By contrast, popular presentations are more explicit about how human agents are classified than is the case in the technical reports they draw on.

From a narrow point of view, development discourse refers primarily to materials produced during technical assessment, policy making, and implementation. This definition has the merit of limiting development policy, plans, and reports to those produced by a correspondingly narrow range of individuals: professionals who write for one another and who are generally aware of their shared identity, however geographically dispersed. This restricted view of development discourse makes some sense for the residents of the metropolitan countries that once possessed colonies—that is, for what is now thought of as the first, developed world, but which is better conceived of as the dominant pole of the world capitalist system. But this definition of development discourse makes no sense whatsoever for the other pole: the people acted upon in the ex-colonies themselves, where “development” (or the lack of it) is a fundamental feature of national and personal discourse.

Understanding development discourse as only the product of a narrowly defined professional cadre greatly limits our understanding of its discursive field and social consequences in at least three ways. First, development professionals produce knowledge not only for their own professions but for the communities whose interests they claim to serve; they seek to mobilize communities for development and to legitimize their activities to make them more effective. Second, because they are culturally formative, professionals actively share notions of development
with their clients and sponsors, and with the broader publics to which they relate. These communications interact in recursive fashion with the clients’ and sponsors’ own responses concerning what it means to be developed or to lack development. Third, development is no more a purely technical concept than is “civilization” or “primitive.” Much of the recent work that unpacks these terms in popular discourses, such as travel writing, applies equally well to development discourse. Popular presentations of development mobilize support for or against activities ranging from projects to foreign policy itself.

All the parties engaged in development institutions and encounters have ideas about development. Often the parties assume that these ideas are commensurate and do not inquire about how local terms share or do not share meaning with discourse produced out of other settings. Anthropology, more than any other discipline, has shown that development projects cannot be portrayed as consensual affairs. The goals and practices associated with “development” are not necessarily shared by all the participants. Misunderstanding is produced as well as communication, and local participants can subvert development goals at the same time as they produce the semblance of assent (Crehan and Von Oppen 1988).

Neither professional concepts nor popular ideas about development—nor the judgments and ideas about cultures and persons that these imply—are exclusively made and produced inside the “developed” world for export to the “undeveloped” remainder. Like colonialism, development is not for export only. The media in the United States and Kenya participate in a global system, often sharing the same ideas and imagery. But surely there are significant differences in circulation and reception within these spaces. In the developed world, ideas and images of the undeveloped, and the contrasts drawn between the undeveloped world and the developed countries, often appear as a contemporary parallel to the turn-of-the-century World Fairs described by Tony Bennett (1988): settings where a disparate Western audience can imagine itself as a homogenous same juxtaposed to an exotic Other.

Nor is this connection between colonialism and imperial expansion on the one hand and development on the other only a parallel. Ideas about development and the persons who possess or lack developed qualities are a central feature of colonial ideology carried over and flourishing in the postcolonial period. Development ideology is one of the constituting features of a global system that is heir to colonial and imperial domination. The central place that ideas about development and personhood play in the world system make them dominant, in Raymond Williams’ (1977) terminology. From this point of view, postcoloniality is barely emergent, more a hope than a reality.
is also a primary Nairobi setting where Jua Kali ("hot sun") artisans work and live. Jewelry making, weaving, auto repair, tin smithing, and brewing are all thriving industries in Mathare. In fact, a line of expensive Mercedes and Peugeots can often be found outside a mud and tin Mathare house and garage, awaiting repair.²

Although the 240 members of the women's roof-tile cooperative had clearly acquired new technical skills and found an economic niche (first-year earnings: 1 million Kenyan shillings), Zwerdling nonetheless argues that their success was due to an additional factor:

Development specialists say one reason a lot of projects fail in Africa is because the organizers spend all their time training people how to do specific tasks such as how to make a tile that doesn't crack, and they neglect another kind of training that's even more important in the long run. The Humama Co-op is trying to avoid that by giving the women hours of what [the Norwegian development specialist who started the self-help group] calls "social training." [The specialist tells us:]

How to interact in a group, how you cope with the fact that one is a manager, one is a foreman, several people are workers, some are on machines producing fancy things, others are just carrying. When they were all neighbors in a slum and equally poor, how do you cope with that? That is a skill you have to develop. (1991:5)

These assertions were followed by a member of the cooperative describing how she had learned to "listen" and adjudicate disputes, unlike her usual experience of life in Mathare Valley.

The laudable goal of this well-meaning presentation was to prove to its audience that development projects can be effective in Africa and that it is worthwhile to spend resources, if done properly. Yet the subtext of the report subverts that goal. This is the picture of the life and culture of Mathare Valley residents drawn by NPR: these are a people living in substandard, crowded conditions, brutalized by violence, lacking basic "social skills" (like cooperation) that would enable them to ameliorate their dire condition. They are the victimized poor, utterly lacking in both material and cultural means of improving themselves.

Weekend Edition's audience learns that successful development demands more than a transformation in technical knowledge and material existence, since the women of Mathare Valley must also learn how to become new kinds of persons. Lacking "social skills," they must be shown the values of cooperation. Totally ignored in this picture is
oration of Zwerdling’s judgments, while less overt and more charitable than those of Kenya Colony’s chief medical officer’s opinions about African morality, nonetheless bears a strong resemblance to them. By virtue of an external agency, the woman who comprizes this cooperative become exceptions to the Mathare (and by extension, African) rule.

Even the *Kenya Times* treats the subjects of its story as exceptions. They are “shining examples” only because they had unusual internal qualities that enabled them to rise above Mathare. While the NPR report makes the women of the Huruma cooperative like the mass of undeveloped Africans, except for their training, the *Kenya Times* makes them the exception to the masses by virtue of their personal qualities. Neither report questions the assumption that internal states such as moral qualities are the effective cause of underdevelopment. As a result, the only means through which underdevelopment can be opposed is through some form of personal transformation or conversion.

NPR’s account of a successful development project in Kenya explicitly derives its authority from no less a source than the 1989 World Bank report, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, which advocates a populist “bottom-up” development agenda combined with stringent structural adjustment policies. According to this report, a major source of Africa’s failure to implement successful development programs has been a “misconceived” government-sponsored “dash for modernization,” copying, but not adapting West African models.” (World Bank 1989:3). It is not difficult to see that the outcome of this influential policy statement, along with its predecessors, has been structural adjustment rather than the populist goal of shifting development away from the government and to the people.

What concerns me in this chapter is not policy as such, but the grounds out of which development discourse and, ipso facto, policy statements are generated. The NPR example is public discourse and not policy statement, but the grounds remain the same. Development discourse moves easily among media and through the different spheres of public and popular life, governmental and policy forums, and into academic life itself. An American story about Kenya is (in all likelihood) derived from a Kenyan newspaper story about Kenya, and these in turn are derived from development activities themselves which legitimate the stories and are, in turn, legitimated by the stories. What all of these share in common are the grounding assumptions about cultures and persons that authorize them. At the same time, the challenges to these stories that are articulated at the local level or in movements that pose alternatives to development orthodoxies also share their same ground-

ings assumptions, even if and when they share them primarily to contest them.

**Grounds of Development Discourse**

What, then, are some of the grounding assumptions of development discourse? Development discourse consists of hierarchical images of self and other based on shared personal qualities and the cultural and social institutions that produce the “developed” or “undeveloped” person. The fragments of this discourse echo and quote one another, often unknowingly; their signs and images become systemic through repetition and reproduction across time, space, and social setting. Sometimes sincerely produced, sometimes ironically quoted, used to defend or oppose, this discourse nurtures a cultural environment in which humans are classified, interpreted, and ultimately explained. These fragments are used in the production of stories, such as Daniel Zwerdling’s attempt to explain why Africa should not be abandoned by American foreign aid and development agencies, or the *Kenya Times*’ attempt to demonstrate that development works in Kenya for some kinds of people. By implication, these stories assert that only a personal transformation will make development work.

The history of development theory, its Enlightenment roots, its colonial associations, and the positions of its various proponents and scholarly critics all suggest that development discourse, in the narrow sense, is sustained by a classificatory scheme that establishes differences among cultures and in types of personhood.” Aruro Escobar (1988), for example, has examined a series of development documents pertaining to Latin America and concludes that development projects invariably identify the subject’s culture and society as the cause of backwardness or resistance to change. Perhaps the most elegant version of this discourse cited by Escobar is the World Bank report on a project in Colombia that begins, “Culture always lags behind economic change.” Other scholars provide accounts of the semiotics of development, and a long-standing literature relates assumptions of development discourse to modernization theory (Binder 1986; Sachs 1992). What is missing in this history, however, are accounts of development theory’s assumptions about personhood and the moral judgments they imply.

The nature of persons on whom development processes were presumed to work was clearly set out in David McClelland’s orthodox but still popular model for teaching people to desire economic achievement (McClelland 1961; McClelland and Winter 1969). McClelland’s liberal
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and relativist model of economic action argued that under the right conditions, members of other societies could be taught to strive for economic achievement. For McClelland, economic achievement does not raise problems of translation between cultures. People placed in the right situations will recognize the rational basis of achievement desires, and in principle, there are no cultural obstacles to appreciating the rationality of forms of maximization. Hence, successful development depended on producing persons who had learned and internalized the appropriate set of values and desires.

Generations of development specialists were trained in McClelland’s theory and techniques of inducing motivational change. Although the new conservative development orthodoxy no longer favors McClelland’s notions, much of the current popular and economic discourse, perhaps most recently in Eastern Europe, seems to have adopted McClelland’s position without attribution. Media discussions accordingly feature “experts” who argue the contradictory but fruitful propositions that (1) the lasting effect of communist rule is that Eastern Europeans must be taught to value profit making, and that (2) the entrepreneurial spirit is stifling economic change by being refractory to larger-scale orchestration and direction.

Even the new conservative orthodoxy in development planning and research, which is antistatist and market oriented, articulates a theory of culture and personhood not fundamentally different from McClelland’s. It still sees the person either as material to be developed or as trapped in a system that prevents development. One of the major statements of the conservative orthodoxy, the 1984 World Bank report, is unsparing in its devotion to an antistatist position and in its faith that the public sector prevents development. But the manner in which it identifies local impediments to development echoes approaches from older theories of development that aspire to use the state as an instrument of change.

In one of the most important precursors to the 1984 report, the so-called Berg report on Africa, a policy statement which also favors the free play of markets and condemns government intervention, the World Bank announces that “physical investment is only one determinant of the spread of development. Human development is at least as important, and sound government action remains at its core” (1982:1). This relatively opaque statement might be construed as a common-sense appeal for training in new techniques of production and management skills. When John Toye (1987) examined this specific literature and the studies underlying the World Bank position, he found that when the role of physical capital formation is discounted, it is usually accompanied by unelaborated statements about problems inherent in existing forms of human capital. Toye tells us that for P. T. Bauer (one of the leading theorists of the new development economics), “the explanatory weight [of why economies grow] is borne by what Bauer called] personal qualities, social institutions, and mores and political arguments that make for endeavor and achievement ... or people’s capacities, attitudes, values and beliefs” (Toye 1987:53). Bauer’s writings assert that different cultures affect the distribution of these capacities, attitudes, values, and beliefs, but in common with virtually all studies in development economics, they contain no empirical demonstration of these assertions. Toye (1987:52) observes:

It is ironic that, as a young economist, Bauer began by criticizing the stereotypes which colonial administrators applied to colonial populations. Not all peasants [in Bauer’s view] were lazy, of limited ambition, and risk adverse, he saw, although his elders believed otherwise. But having rejected one stereotype, he quickly settled for another. Whether they have these qualities or not depends on which cultural group they belong to.

World War II marks the transition from colonial discourse to development discourse. The end of the colonial period manifested a concern with social welfare and infrastructure development (concerning Africa, see Cooper 1996). These became major concerns of the post–World War II period, which was also distinguished by remarkable swings from state-oriented to market-oriented development policies, articulated by such major government and international organizations as the World Bank, African nations, and donor country agencies such as USAID. As Michael Watts (1995) argues, this literature and the programs it authorizes have oscillated between two poles: top-down, state-oriented programs and bottom-up, populist development agendas. These policy debates divide the development community over points of entry, means of development, and factors that retard economic development. As disputations and labile as development debates and projects appear to be over time, changes in critical assumptions are nonetheless restricted by limits. Although their mechanics, strategies, and rationalizations may exhibit drastic changes, assumptions about the people involved in development enterprises change far less. Development discourse retains and reproduces notions about how cultures and persons are ranked, and these notions preserve the boundaries of theoretical discourse by providing reasons for the success or failure of development projects. Both the 1950 World Bank plan for Colombia and the Berg report contain these notions, despite the fact that they are otherwise opposed about the pos-
sibility of producing change with government collaboration. Yet neither the World Bank nor any other development entity has ever undertaken a major, systematic research program to test whether such factors as culture, religion, gender, class, or community of origin affect willingness and ability to engage in economic development projects.6

Ideas about differences in culture, capacity, morality, and personhood in development discourse are guided by an ostensibly "anthropological paradigm" that is mostly apparent more by sides and assumptions than in writing and planning. This is rarely the object of comment except by a few dissenting scholars such as John Toye, as mentioned above. The larger paradigm is familiar because it reproduces major features of colonial and orientalist thinking about exotic cultures.

This discourse is anthropological because it is based on a scheme for classifying cultures. I would hope that it is superfluous to add that it is not a discourse made by anthropologists or characteristic of professional anthropologists' thinking about cultures. This confusion is often made by the less alert readers of accounts of anthropological discourses. For instance, most who read V. Y. Mudimbe's The Invention of Africa (1988) fail to read the last chapter of the book, in which Mudimbe pleads for an empirically engaged anthropology as a solution to the dilemmas of operating within the limits of the dominant discursive formation. In a more historical vein, Henrietta Kuklick (1991) has shown how Africanist anthropologists of the functionalist sort were regarded as a hindrance by colonial officials interested in research that would confirm their anthropological discourse. Kuklick's report of Lord Hailey's "exasperation" with functionalist anthropologists is telling. "Anthropological expertise was so vital to colonial development," said Hailey in 1946, "that if the anthropologist would not supply colonial regimes with necessary information, we must find someone calling himself by a different name who will do so" (quoted in Kuklick 1991:14). Perhaps this is a privileged insight into the birth of the development expert? Kuklick describes how anthropologists were viewed as both useless and resistant. If anthropologists were in the pay of colonial regimes, they had a very poor employment record, one which has been confirmed in the notorious reluctance of development agencies to employ anthropologists.

What is anthropological about development discourse is hence not that it draws on anthropological theory, but that it is a set of assumptions about how cultural differences are constituted and manifested in action. What links development discourse to these other discourses are the similarities in the ways they define "same" and "other," and the ways in which these are constructed as exotic and quotidian. The primary element in development thinking that concerns me here, however, is less the orientalist trope of defining the other as lacking features of the Western self than the more oblique discursive strategy of thinking about subjects of development as exceptions to the universal rules that govern the evolution of human societies. This is the special, but not unique, twist that development discourse gives to the construction of the Other. What are involved here are not simply exoticizing strategies of representation, for the semiotic movements are more complex. All peoples are initially made equivalent only to set up a hierarchy in which some peoples are shown to be exceptions to historical processes. At one and the same time, all people are admitted to a universal category, even as some are denied full membership on the grounds that they are exceptions to the rule.6

Writing as the subject of this type of universalizing discourse, Carlos Fuentes (1974:85) describes this discursive strategy as follows:

A writer born in Poland or Mexico, so far from the gods and so near to the devils, realizes before he is out of knee pants that it is one thing to write from within a culture that deems itself central and another to write from the boundaries of eccentricity—an eccentricity defined by the central culture's claim to universality. The central culture tends to believe that it speaks with the words of God, or, at least, that it has a direct and open line to the ear of divinity. Behind [these] unselfconscious attitudes...stood the weighty conviction, elaborated by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, that human nature is always one and the same for all men, although imperfectly developed, as Locke put it, in children, madmen and savages and that this true human nature is to be found, permanently fixed, in Europe and in European elites.

Carlos Fuentes writes to a different audience than development specialists. Addressing a literary audience, his concern is to explore differences in the experience of acknowledged heirs to a literary tradition and of those who are granted grudging admission to it. Fuentes describes the marginalization that excludes some cultural formations from admission to a canon. Development discourse shares some of these features but operates in a slightly different fashion. It cannot explicitly exclude or marginalize the very agents whom it addresses and strives to transform. Instead, it defines the subjects of development as exceptions whose very exceptional nature is the problem that development theory seeks to understand and that development practices seek to transform. Development discourse creates both the material to be transformed and defines the process of transformation.7

The very act of creating exceptions to the processes deemed to be
universal, such as development itself, generates a puzzle about human nature. In particular, it raises questions about differences in personhood and agency answered by the assumptions enshrined in the anthropological paradigm of development theory. If all people are equal, are there exceptions to this generalization? What causes can be adduced to account for these exceptions? Most importantly, what actions are needed to move people from being exceptions to serving as examples of universal rules?

At this point, we seem to have moved a long way from the Industrial Revolution as it is described by E. P. Thompson, where a new form of human nature is the apparent goal of practices such as time keeping in factories and the discourse of human nature that is associated with them. The problem of human nature specified here is exceptionalism, the anthropological puzzle of why people seemingly possessed with the same capacities as the dominant fraction of a colonial or postcolonial society appear and act differently—especially when this difference manifests itself as a “lack of development.” But the differences are not so great as they might appear, especially if one considers differences between early and late capitalist development itself. The puzzle of how to produce a different human nature is prospective. It envisons a future in which all are the same. Seen from the perspective of that future, which has actually been characterized by patterns of uneven development and acts of passive and active resistance, the puzzle takes the form of triumphalism disappointed. It is not how to make new human beings, but given that all human beings are alike, why are “they” so different?

Whichever historical juncture one uses to situate the problem of human nature, the solutions posed assume that there are categories of people—members of different cultures, men and women, young and old—whose critical differences in personhood and agency have consequences for development. Personhood and agency are concepts that mutually implicate one another (Jackson and Karp 1990). Agency refers to the effects of actions on the world, while concepts of personhood entail notions about the different capacities people have to produce these effects. Any scheme for classifying cultures and persons will carry with it ideas about personhood and agency.

In the long anthropological and philosophical tradition of writing about personhood, a major distinction stands out. Meyer Fortes (1989) formulated this as a distinction between two aspects of personhood: the person and the individual. The person is the “objective side,” the roles, capacities, rights, and duties that a society endows upon its members. By contrast, the individual is the “subjective side,” related to how the person knows or experiences what is socially endowed. Fortes’s extensive work on personhood explores the space between social endowment and subjective experience. In encounters organized by the discourse of development, a space is set up in which different concepts of personhood and agency are put forward, and some actors, at least, experience considerable discrepancies between who they think themselves to be and how they find themselves defined.

This is the space that Fuentes describes in his essay, a space which also emerges in colonial or orientalist discourse. The anthropological paradigm of development theory constructs categories of persons and grants greater capacities and authority to some categories on the basis of differences in the presumed effects they have on the world. Development theory and its anthropological paradigm pose solutions to development problems in emotionally flat and neutral terms associated with most professional communities. There are moral overtones and discriminatory attitudes manifested in development theory, but they remain implicit and understated. It is difficult to imagine, however, that they have no consequences. They inform more general notions of what it means to be modern—both ours and theirs. Not that these notions are entirely accepted. The ways that ideas about development, such as the Swahili concept of maendeleo, take on different meanings according to who expresses them—how they become redefined in unpredictable ways—show that personhood is more than simply a matter of being assigned a status and identity. It is a field in which the discrepancies between the definition of the person and the experience of the individual are played out in complex discourses of development and in ideas about hierarchies of cultures and persons that are encoded in them.

Fundamental questions are encoded in professional and popular uses of the concept of development. I have already argued that development invokes ideas about modernity, who possesses them, and how they are possessed. But we should not forget that development is the discourse of nation-states and the global political structures that cut across them. International agencies and governmental and nongovernmental organizations alike are engaged in the task of development. In many postcolonial societies, the development agency is the form through which the international order connects the local to the global. Hence it is vitally important to keep in mind that the discourse of development is at one and the same time a global discourse, an ambivalent discourse that cannot fully make up its mind about the nature of the subjects who act and are acted on, and a hierarchical discourse that sets up distinctions among cultures and persons. In the end, I believe that discourses of development are a key means through which the world system defines itself. Development and the questions raised by various forms of inter-
national inequality are “the hidden text of the discourse between North and South” (Thompson 1992).

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Notes

1. An excellent account of travelers’ narratives that show the relationship between ideas about human nature and labor is J. M. Coetzee’s “Idleness in South Africa” (1988).
2. In The African Artisan: Education and the Informal Sector in Kenya, Kenneth King makes the ironic point that the success of this thriving artisanal sector is due largely to Kenya’s heavy reliance on imported machinery that can be cannibalized, such as automobiles (1977:57).
3. The Kenyan Times’ shining light at the end of the tunnel language in fact recurs in the imagery through which Zwerdling contrasts the horrifying lives of the drinking, drug-abusing, spouse-abusing slum dwellers (before) and the warm glow that emanates from the happy, productive cooperative members (after): “When I visited the factory one morning, I found thousands of roof tiles drying in the sun like pink slippers on giant shoe racks. The women stopped the machines and put down their shovels for a few minutes and formed a circle to give a traditional visitor’s welcome.”
5. See John Peel’s (1977) excellent article on how cultural and religious factors have been used as isolated elements in explaining responses to development. Peel rightly points out that a major conceptual flaw in the academic research on development is that culture is conceived of in isolation from spheres of human activity such as politics and economy. He writes, “The serious task for sociology, and especially the sociology of development, is to

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The impetus to be or become modern refracts differently in alternative world areas, and anthropologists have considered this process through a range of related terms and concepts. In recent years, multiples of modernity have been referred to as “alternative modernities,” “parallel modernities,” “vernacular modernities,” “subaltern modernities,” “other modernities,” “multiple modernities,” or simply “our modernity." Most of these formulations have several features in common. First, they focus our attention on the articulation between features that are international or global and those that are national or local in scale. Second, they force us to consider the relation between structures of market economy or political power and those of cultural orientation and subjective experience. The conceptualization of an alternative modernity attempts to capture the discordance that actors face as they grapple with a desire to be progressive or modern while attempting to do so on their own terms and in ways that are meaningful to them. As Marshall Sahlins (2001:7) put it, “people all around the world... recycle elements of their traditional existence in the construction of their own indigenous versions of modernity.”

A relativized notion of modernity is designed to make our understanding of contemporary circumstances acute by fusing into a single concept the paradox of contemporary experience: people are subject to increasing influences in common at the same time that they maintain, if not increase, their cultural and subjectivity diversity. The alternative modern captures and internalizes this contradiction. In a sense, the notion of a plural modern is an oxymoron: it combines discordant